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ABSTRACT

Due to ongoing changes in the labor market, groups that assist people in developing or changing career directions are particularly important. This digest outlines some features of employment group counseling. Research has shown that the unemployed face numerous factors, such as job rejections and financial pressures, that can hinder the job search. Such hindrances can be addressed in a group context, in which there are opportunities for support and meaningful exchange with others. Studies of such groups show that timing of the group experience is important. The goal of these groups is to help people develop communication skills, give them information about the current economic climate and labor market opportunities, and help them develop sufficient self-confidence to be more self-sustaining in pursuing their goals. One such model addresses these goals by allowing the group goals and activities to define the purpose of the group. Members' needs and roles are then developed from two sources: needs related to the career challenges of members, and needs related to being a group member. Group design is thus established so that group activities are congruent with both group purpose and the stage of group development. Such a model remains fluid and dynamic. (RJM)

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A Model for Group Employment Counseling: ERIC Digest.

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by William A. Borgen

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A Model for Group Employment Counseling

William A. Borgen

Overview

The model of group counseling presented in this paper is based on several studies by Borgen and Amundson regarding people's psychological reaction to unemployment (Amundson & Borgen, 1987; Borgen & Amundson, 1987).

The Experience of Unemployment

Within the current economic context of rapidly changing labor market opportunities and structural unemployment (Herr, 1993), many people are faced with the prospect of not simply losing a job, but a way of life. The loss affects the core of being and can result in a series of emotional reactions that approximate loss reactions (Kubler-Ross, 1969): namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Coupled with loss is both the confusion of setting a new career direction and the stress associated with the job search. The end result can be an emotional roller coaster which distracts the person, the family, and the professionals trying to offer assistance.

Coping with Unemployment

Amundson & Borgen (1987) identified several factors that either helped or hindered the unemployed. Facilitating factors included support from family and friends, positive thinking, career changes and retraining, part-time or temporary work, job-search support groups, vocational counseling, initial job-search activities, making job contacts, and physical activity. Hindering factors were job rejections, financial pressures, contacts with government agencies, unknown or negative future, ineffective job-search activities, negative thinking, and spouse or family problems. The hindering factors reflect the stress of the job search, the re-definition of self associated with unemployment, and strained relationships. The facilitating factors focus on relationships and meaningful activities.

The Impact of Group Employment Counseling

Taken together, these factors pointed to the potential of group employment counseling. In a group context there are opportunities for support and meaningful exchange with others. In order to examine this further, Amundson & Borgen (1988) investigated the experiences of people who had been involved in a variety of group employment counseling programs. Participants were contacted three to five months after the groups had finished. Group employment counseling resulted in a dramatic upswing that, in some cases, led to a job (48%) and, in other cases, led to sustained, independent job-search activity (52%). Timing of the group experience seemed particularly important. Emotionally speaking, some people tended to drift slowly downward after two months of being unemployed, while others maintained a positive outlook for up to six months, after which they experienced rapid emotional decline. Participation in the group some eight to nine months after job loss seemed to produce an "emotional rebound," where people were able to maintain a more positive outlook whether or not a job was found.

When participants described their group involvement, they emphasized what they had learned, the support that they had received, and the ways in which their self-esteem had been enhanced. They appreciated the structured learning activity which was meaningful and which enabled them to meet others facing similar experiences. For most people, their main regret was that they had not joined a group earlier.

A Group Employment Counseling Model

Based on the information that task (i.e., structured learning activities) and social support aspects of groups were about equally helpful, a group employment counseling model was developed. The model has two emphases: acquisition of relevant skills and information (the "educative" element), and the development and maintenance of a constructive attitude, which is often impeded by unrecognized emotions such as anxiety, fear and depression.

The group counseling model (Borgen, Pollard, Amundson, & Westwood, 1989) focuses on the development of knowledge, skills, and personal awareness. These three elements are important regardless of the purpose of the group, be it career exploration, career decision-making, job search, or coping with unemployment. Within this approach, participants have the opportunity to acquire relevant information, practice skills needed to be successful, and address any barriers that they may be facing.

The model, depicted in Figure 1, has five core elements:

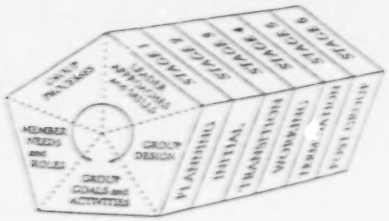

Figure 1. Group counseling model
From: Borgen, Pollard, Amundskn & Westwood, (1989) Employment groups: The counselling connection, p. 261. Used with permission.

1. The *group goals and activities* define the purpose of the group.

2. *Member needs and roles* develop from two sources: (a) needs related to the career challenges of members, and (b) needs related to being a group member: inclusion, control, and trust (Schutz, 1958).

3. The *group processes* influence the functioning of the group and include communication, norm setting, decision making, confrontation of the problem, problem solving, and conflict management.

4. *Leader approaches and skills* include personal qualities necessary for group leadership approaches (directing, influencing, assisting, and delegating) that promote effective group leadership, and particular skills (reaction, interaction, and action) necessary to respond to the needs of group members at various stages of group development.

5. Group design focuses on sequencing group activities to be congruent with both group purpose and stage of group development.

The stages of group development provide a second dimension to the model and are consistent with Tuckman's (1963) overview of group development.

1. The *planning stage* provides a foundation for the group. Initial referral and screening are important to ensure member needs match group goals.

2. When group members first come together (initial stage), there is a need for members to feel part of the group (inclusion). In this stage, it is important to focus on the integration of individual and group goals and the establishment of group norms.

3. As members become more aware of the needs of each other and the leader, the issue of control can become more central. This leads to a *transition stage* in which there is greater potential for reluctance and conflict.

4. Following this period of potential unrest, group members move into the *working stage*, characterized by greater trust and an emphasis on commitment and productivity. The group functions with greater autonomy, and there is less reliance on the leader for support and direction.

5. As the group approaches the *termination stage* there is an opportunity to integrate what has been learned and to plan for goals. Emotionally, there may be feelings of loss which need to be acknowledged by the leader.

6. The *post-group stage* involves meeting after the group has finished to provide continued support and encouragement.

The model is fluid and dynamic. The five components of group development influence, and are influenced by, each other. They require the group leaders to be aware of group member needs and to modify activities and leadership approaches accordingly. In addition, the stages of group development do not proceed in a linear fashion. Members often return to earlier stages in their general progression through the group. Leaders need to be aware of which stages group members may be in at any particular time so that the leaders can tailor their approach and skills accordingly.

Conclusion

Within the current context of structural change in the labor market, groups that assist people in developing or changing career directions are particularly important. The goal of these groups is to help people (a) develop communication and other skills needed to gain personally relevant information related to their fields of interest, (b) gain information about the current economic climate and labor market opportunities, and (c) develop sufficient self-confidence to be more self-sustaining in maneuvering towards their goals.

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